

Moreover (and Avril Alba's chapter provides insight), how do the memory and history of the Holocaust extend beyond the Jewish community, and what is their place in the wider heritage?

These questions, of course, have particular pertinence to groups most connected to the Holocaust, but they concern all Australians. We are witnessing memories of a past that very much inflects the present, art and artefacts and vestiges collected in museums, testimonies gathered in books or recordings, and the interpretation of the past by historians and curators. We are looking at memories that have sometimes remained unspoken, forgotten or even repressed, and history that can also be contested and even denied.

Australia is a country filled with memories and dreams, from the dreamtime of the indigenous inhabitants to the nightmares of those who brought their sufferings to this country from the concentration camps of central Europe or the killing fields of Southeast Asia. It also holds the dreams of those who sought here a place of refuge, opportunity, peace and prosperity. Works such as Tom Lawson and James Jordan's collection invite reflection on these memories, consideration of our personal and collective 'memory work', concern with the creation and preservation of sites of memory. The volume offers new case studies on the global memory of the Holocaust, and also explores an important aspect of Australia's own history.

Robert Aldrich

## TESTIFYING TO THE HOLOCAUST

*Edited by Pam Maclean, Michele Langfield  
and Dvir Abromovich*

*The Australian Association of Jewish Studies,  
Sydney, 2008, pp 226.*

*Testifying to the Holocaust* seeks to systematically examine the body of oral testimony held at the Jewish Holocaust Museum and Research Centre in Melbourne (JHMRC) from a variety of methodological and disciplinary perspectives. Faced with the enormity of current holdings of survivor video testimony in collections such as the JHMRC, the Visual History Archive at the University of Southern California and the Fortunoff Archive at Yale University, the central question posed by the volume is a timely one: how do we study these vast holdings in order to extract their stored historical knowledge and assess their impact and meaning in the present?

Given the immensity of the task at hand, *Testifying to the Holocaust* makes a vital contribution to this area of research but falls short of a comprehensive review. For while the majority of the articles do engage directly with the vexed issue of methodological approach, this difficult question remains largely under-theorized given the peculiarities of the medium of video testimony and the sheer volume of the JHMRC holdings. Where methodology is found wanting, conclusions can only be described as 'tentative' and as such the usefulness of video testimony for historical and other forms of research remains open to question.

However, while it may not answer every difficulty involved in utilising this medium, this volume certainly asks pertinent and often illuminating questions. In their introduction editors Pam Maclean, Michele Langfield and Dvir Abramovich invite the reader to consider video testimony as one might a literary text. Building on the already voluminous literature in this area of study, they approach the video archive as a repository of 'pure potential'<sup>1</sup> and embrace its ability to shed light on aspects of Holocaust experience that may have been overlooked in more document-centred approaches. Referencing Christopher Browning's recent attempt to reconstruct three Nazi camps about which very little physical or documentary evidence remains, the editors do not belie the potential for testimony to supplement the historical record, but posit that for repositories such as the JHMRC to be fully realized it is the potential they hold for research beyond the purely historical that must now be considered.

As such Pam Maclean, Katerina Von Kellenbach and Donna-Lee Frieze's respective contributions consider testimony as sources for political, theological and philosophical reflection. Kellenbach's deconstruction of feminist theologian Melissa Raphael's 'ethic of care' through applying the lens of the perpetrator provides a compelling example of the fruits that such an approach might yield. In issuing the challenge that 'the theological, philosophical and ethical crisis of the Holocaust can only be fully appreciated if the oral testimony of suffering and survival is read alongside the evasive, deceptive and distorted voice of perpetration,' Kellenbach reminds us that not only victims bear witness to atrocity. With regard to understanding the Holocaust, we are lacking in the most vital testimony of all—that of those who carried out the killings. In this particular case the absence of testimony from the women who provided Raphael's 'ethic of care' to perpetrator fathers, husbands and sons forms a lacuna in our ability to regard women's traditional role as 'care givers' as redemptive in any form. Without such testimony, Kellenbach contends that Raphael's 'ethic' remains



purely victim-centred and, therefore, ultimately inadequate as theodicy. Thus, while Kellenbach convincingly illustrates the weaknesses inherent in Raphael's approach, her focus also serves to reinforce the valuable contribution that testimony makes to both theological reflection on the Holocaust and to our understanding of gendered behaviour *in extremis*.

In their ability to narrow down the selection of testimonies under review, focused inquiries such as Kellenbach's and Peter Monteath's examination of *Mischlinge* fare better with regard to methodological approach than perhaps the more ambitious case studies by Michele Langefield, Pam Maclean (with Michele Langfield) and Amelia Klein. All three researchers survey broad cross sections of the JHMRC archive in order to identify 'patterns of response'. Langfield does so with the goal of assessing the long-term psychological effects of Holocaust trauma on survivors; Maclean and Langefield seek to understand the contribution testimony may make to patterns in Australian migration history and Klein explores the efficacy of video testimony as a communicative 'tool' across generations.

As Langfield points out a 'certain inconclusiveness pervades these subjects, so much so that it is almost impossible to make any meaningful generalisations' with regard to survivor coping mechanisms and the 'meaning' bestowed by survivors on their own survival—beyond the already well established and documented phenomenon of 'survivor guilt'. Despite this considerable challenge Langfield and Maclean do manage to come to some conclusions regarding the interplay between trauma and migration through a close examination of the migration experiences of pre and post-war survivor refugees. While the authors characterize their conclusions as 'tentative', their work illustrates the promise of such approaches to supplement rather than assert patterns of response when writing migration history. Langfield and Maclean's careful 'reading' of the video sources reveal the layers of meaning that are evoked in personal testimony through a consideration not simply of testimony content but also of the interviewees' affect. Indeed, it is this 'feeling' that testimony conveys which may well be its redeeming value for research and documentation.

The ability, inherent in the genre of video testimony, to transmit both knowledge and emotion animates Klein's article. Klein is interested in what such testimony can offer future generations, not with regard to oft-repeated platitudes of 'warning', but rather in its ability to facilitate 'intergenerational dialogue' and allow the grandchildren of survivors to 'make sense' of their grandparent's experiences, 'enabling descendants to deal with feelings of loss and

mourning'. Klein's work certainly bespeaks the potential for video testimony in this regard but she also reminds us that this is largely only possible when deliberate educational programs are constructed in order to facilitate communication across generations.

Klein's observation that it is against its 'usefulness' that the ultimate value of video testimony will be measured is further explored in Bjorn Krondorfer's thoughtful concluding article. Krondorfer's ruminations on the potential pitfalls that a surfeit of memory holds, urgesurge the reader to re-examine the usefulness of 'forgetting' as the essential corollary to effective 'memory work'. He reminds us that 'preserving and remembering are not the same things' and that the creation of an archive does not equate to an appreciation of its content. 'Forgetting' in Krondorfer's definition is the beginning of any 'purposeful' memory work, for any remembrance of the past must be selective in order to convey meaning rather than simply transmit information. In this spirit, *Testifying to the Holocaust* must itself be considered a valuable contribution to such memory work, a valiant attempt to bring meaning to complex and divergent memories, and in so doing bring to light not only the 'facts' of survivor's experiences, but the long-term impact of these experiences on the victims and their descendants.

Avril Alba

### ENDNOTES

1. Aleida Assmann, 'History, Memory, and the Genre of Testimony', *Poetics Today* 27, no. 2 (2006), p. 271.